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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

EGYPT: Controversy Over US Military Facilities

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The increase in US military activity in Egypt over the past year has become a controversial domestic issue. President Sadat's domestic opponents and foreign enemies hope to use the activity to undermine his position. []

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US activity in 1980 included the deployment in January of an F-4 squadron to Cairo for three months and the dispatch of 1,400 troops from the Rapid Deployment Force for joint maneuvers with the Egyptians in December. The most controversial issue is Sadat's offer to let the US use and upgrade Egyptian facilities at Ra's Banas. []

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The most vocal attacks against the US activity have come from the Socialist Labor Party, which controls the largest antigovernment bloc in the People's Assembly. It has warned that the US presence in Egypt is a "new and dangerous circumstance" and demanded a full investigation of US activities by the Assembly. []

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Leaders of another leftist group told US officials last summer they believed that even the temporary presence of US military forces in Egypt made Sadat much more vulnerable domestically and would serve to identify the regime too closely with the US. The strongest opposition group, the rightwing Muslim Brotherhood, has been less vocal but has also attacked the US presence. []

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The opposition disputes Sadat's claim that he is offering the US the use of Egyptian "facilities" and not providing "bases" that the US will control. Opposition spokesmen assert there are secret agreements that give the US unconditional access rights to Egyptian territory. []

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Sadat's domestic enemies play on memories of Egypt's colonial past when British military forces interfered in Egyptian domestic politics and of the massive Soviet military presence in the early 1970s. The opposition also charges the US military presence isolates Egypt from the Arab world, undermines its nonaligned credentials, and threatens to draw Egypt into a conflict between the US and the Soviets. []

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The Soviets have sought to exploit the issue. TASS highlighted charges in a Kuwaiti newspaper in January that Sadat has secretly agreed to allow the US to stockpile nuclear and bacteriological weapons at Ra's Banas. []

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Sadat's Response

Sadat and other senior officials recognize the political dangers involved in providing the US with bases or even access to Egyptian facilities. Sadat has stressed that Egypt will maintain full sovereignty and control over all facilities used by the US and that no US military personnel will be stationed permanently on Egyptian soil. []

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Foreign Minister Ali has privately told US officials that opposition to a formal, written access agreement is virtually unanimous in the People's Assembly. Egyptian officials also have ruled out any US military presence in the Sinai airfields that Israel has returned or will return to Egyptian control pursuant to the peace treaty with Israel. []

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Egyptian military leaders have publicly welcomed the US presence as a symbol of Egypt's strategic importance. They hope that access to Egyptian facilities will make the US more inclined to grant Egyptian requests for accelerated delivery of new military equipment--a desire Sadat shares. These officers also regret the damage to Egypt's relations with the other Arabs and the USSR, however, and take care individually not to be branded as too "pro-American." []

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Outlook

Despite the domestic concern, Sadat is not likely to retract his offer of military facilities. To avoid giving his critics ammunition, however, he probably will:

--Refuse to sign a formal access agreement with the US.

--Seek to portray the US presence as temporary and designed to defend Arab and Islamic interests.

--Keep the US profile low by offering facilities in out-of-the-way areas like Ra's Banas. []

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Discontent over the US military presence, nonetheless, is likely to increase unless Sadat can point to offsetting benefits such as increased economic and military assistance to Egypt or favorable developments in the autonomy negotiations with Israel. []

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An increased US military presence also runs some risk of provoking terrorist incidents against US military personnel. If the US military presence becomes permanent, it--as well as the nearly 15,000 American civilians in Egypt--will provide a highly visible target. []

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